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The Twenty-Fifth Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee: A Lighting Artist's Approach

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THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE:
A LIGHTING ARTIST'S APPROACH

A Thesis Presented

by

JONATHAN D. HICKS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Theater

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Jonathan D. Hicks

Approved as to style and content by:

Penny L. Remsen, Chair

Michael Cottom, Member

Milan Dragicevich, Member

Penny L. Remsen, Department Chair
Department of Theater

DEDICATION

To my Rainbow, without your constant support, love, inspiration, and prayers, I would never have had the vision and drive that I have today. To my Peanut, you are my energy, joy, and spirit; thank you for loving me unconditionally. To my Pebbles, you are my laughter, hope, and dreams; thank you for reminding me of the present. Adrienne, Ethan, and Camille, this has all been for you. Without your presence in my life, I would not have the joy and beauty in my work. Thank you for your unconditional love! I love you all!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Family encompasses each journey in life, asks the hard questions, challenges the status quo, and remains faithful until they see the light of a day of thanksgiving.

Penny Remsen, thank you for committing yourself to me as my mentor. You stood by me during the difficult self-discoveries, the hard lessons of an artist searching for a voice, and through the wonderful exploration of life. Thank you for your dedication to your students, the theater, and artistry.

A heart felt THANK YOU is owed to so many in the theater department. Michael Dubin, our department master electrician, for his consistent morning story times, reliable guidance, and dedication. Julie Fife, June Gaeke, Michael Cottom, Milan Dragicevich, and Harley Erdman, thank you for your dedication to my development as a student and artist. Your involvement in my life over the past three years has shaped who I have become, and I am deeply grateful to you for your patience, kindness, and care.

A special thank you to my professor, colleague, and friend, Traci Klainer. You have been a relentless supporter of my development and success. Matthew Richards, thank you for your calm composure. Your keen eye has helped to shape my articulation and understanding of the designer's relationship to theater. Thaddeus Kramer, you are my opposite through and through. Without you here to compliment me and challenge me, I would not have succeeded. Thank you for your friendship! Thank you to the production team, technical staff, and my assistant, Dana DeLise. By creating this musical, each of you has given to the UMass community a lovely story and a memorable dream.

ABSTRACT

THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE:
A LIGHTING ARTIST'S APPROACH

MAY 2011

JONATHAN D. HICKS, B.A., WESTMONT COLLEGE

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Penny Remsen

A reflection of the lighting artist's approach for the lighting design of The Twenty-fifth Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. University of Massachusetts, Amherst Department of Theater's Fall 2010 production used as a research ground for the experimentation of lighting design through the cueing process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER	
1. ARTISTIC STATEMENT	1
2. PRE-PRODUCTION	3
The Play	3
Research	3
The Design Process	4
3. PRODUCTION	7
Technical Rehearsals	7
The Final Design	13
Conclusion	14
APPENDICES	
A. PHOTO CD	16
B. DOCUMENT CD	17

CHAPTER 1

ARTISTIC STATEMENT

Theater is a mode of communication. When constructed well, the art of theater forms a solid core, which may be enfolded by layers of information necessary to accomplish the artist's objectives. As a theater artist, I seek to formulate common goals among my collaborators in order to communicate with a specific audience. The successful collaboration results in a performance that causes curiosity, discussion, and change in society.

Without society, an audience, and collaborators, artistic endeavors become merely self-indulgent experiments. The community derived from the art of theater gives my labor purpose and meaning. This same community produces joy, excitement, and a desire to continue experimenting and creating. Illuminating stories that transform from performance to performance and incite the audience to pursue change around the world.

The artistic team utilizes the story to create innovative products. In the creative process, the team and the actors collaborate to generate an expression of the story. The resulting product becomes a shared experience between the team, the actors, and the audience. I want these shared experiences to lead to refined conversations because of their exposure to the story. As a result, these individuals seek to inspire change in our world because of the imagined world they lived in for an hour or two.

In life, I experience different challenges on a regular basis that make each moment fresh and revitalizing. As an artist, I cultivate these experiences to inspire my work and fuel my creative energy. Images, songs, poetry, light, shadow, wind, sadness, happiness, confusion..., these and many other stimuli guide and shape the layers of

information folded over the core of my work. The director, production designers, and production staff comprise the network of artists and collaborators who gather stimuli, which ultimately becomes the driving force behind the chosen story. The story and its performance are the vehicle for encouraging growth, conversations, and interest in local and global communities.

As a lighting artist, I use the inspiration and collaboration from the artistic team to form the practical, tangible and visible layer of my work. The practical process begins with an idea, story, and/or play. This idea grows through establishing a scenic breakdown, which then reveals the nature of the piece whether it is constructed with a unifying arc or many smaller vignettes encompassing a singular or multifaceted idea. I then take this information and determine the appropriate lighting environments to build the arc, shape the vignettes, and tell the story with light. Before the lighting art may be completed, it must first explore the world of the story in relationship to the actors, time, and space. In many cases, this is accomplished during cueing sessions as part of technical rehearsals in the final days before the piece is presented to its first audience. The final and key element to my work as a lighting artist involves engaging the audience in conversations about the piece and how it may impact the world.

CHAPTER 2

PRE-PRODUCTION

The Play

The Twenty-Fifth Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee by William Finn and Rachel Sheinkin tells the story of six contestants and three spelling bee administrators overcoming a wide variety of personal insecurities, ambitions, fears, and dreams as they make discoveries about themselves, each other, and their families. The musical takes place in a local, elementary school “cafetorinasium,” scheduled for the Twenty-Fifth Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. A series of present time moments, flashbacks, moment’s frozen in time, musical numbers, and internal monologues provide character-building situations for these people to address their individuality, fears, and dreams. In presenting this story to the Univeristy of Massachusetts, Amherst community, the production team reminds the audience of their elementary school experiences—contests, experiments, success, failure, acceptance and rejection.

Research

The characters of this musical first came to life during the initial script reading in September of 2010. The director, Dawn Monique Williams, introduced the production team to the characters, people who strive to find a place where they belong. An internal exploration of the text slowly revealed the physical and psychological struggles of each character. With the tools of an archaeologist in hand, I gently brushed and picked away at the eccentricities, dreams, and complaints until the story was uncovered.

The characters are indeed ordinary people with recognizable personal struggles. An examination of the text exposed Rona’s inability to live beyond her past, Chip’s

premature self-confidence, Schwarzy's unsuccessful struggle for self-acceptance, Coneybear's acceptance of his quirky intelligence, Olive's unstable familial relationships, Barfee's reliance on tricks and illusion for success, Marcy's triumphant struggle over self-acceptance, Panch's battle for recognition, and Mahoney's discovery of new talents. These character discoveries in the text remained incomplete ideas and images until the production was eventually blocked, developed, and produced. The actors' development through guidance from the director brought the text to life and gave my textual exploration meaning and significance.

The Design Process

Utilizing the character breakdown generated from the text with inspiration from the director, I focused my attention on crafting an intricate scenic breakdown (Please see Appendix B document titled "Scene Breakdown"). This scenic breakdown assisted me in articulating clearly and concisely five distinctly different lighting environments: present time, flashbacks, moment's frozen in time, musical numbers, and internal monologues. I strongly believe the play's momentum and audience interaction hinge upon the precise and recognizable transitions from one type of environment to the next.

The authors, William Finn and Rachel Sheinkin, offer the production team an opportunity to establish common ground between the performers and the audience. The first three lighting environments are established within the first few minutes of the musical. Rona enters in present time, flashes back to a memory of her glory days as a champion speller then shifts straight into the first musical number, which introduces each character of the play. Scenic designer, Dennis Berfield, presented the production team with a unit set that helped establish the world of the play. Costume designer, Erin White,

presented the production team with realistically colorful costumes that helped to develop each character's personality. These choices provided me with the opportunity to give the audience a lighting design that transforms the unit set into each lighting environment necessary to tell the story while maintaining the integrity of the scenic and costume designs.

Dawn and I made a clear choice about how to establish present time and musical numbers, while we initially chose to leave the design of the other three lighting environments to my artistic inspiration. Here I will give a brief description of the initial design ideas for each type of environment, while reserving detailed descriptions of the development of these ideas for the chapter on Technical Rehearsals. It was during the technical rehearsals that these ideas, excepting the present time scenes, underwent distinct transformations based on discoveries of the light in the actual performance space. I planned to establish the present time environments by lighting the “cafetorinasium” like a typical, elementary school gymnasium (cool, soft light throughout the space). The flashbacks were envisioned as isolated scenes with an appropriate color inspired by the actor's costume (a saturate, purple wash to go with Schwarzy's purple sweater). I hoped to use a dull color combined with a template system to break-up the environment during the moment's frozen in time (the template system casts light and shadow to reduce the saturation of color and intensity of the light). Musical numbers would push the systems to their maximum brightness and color saturation in combination with the movement of the music (color washes at 100% intensity). I planned to establish the internal monologues by pulling light away from the other characters and focusing attention on the character having the moment (gym lighting at a dimmer level and a special on the main character

of the scene). In the next chapter, I describe how I discovered that the ideas for the flashbacks, frozen moments, and internal monologues were not distinct enough from each other to clearly distinguish for the audience the difference between these three lighting environments.

Alongside these design ideas, I had decided to focus intensely on my ability to cue the show. My advisors and I believed that one of the greatest areas of growth that I could undergo during this process was in direct relationship to how I chose to shift the light during scenes and through transitions to move the story forward. In order to stimulate this area of growth, I chose to pre-cue the show with clear placement, timing, and an initial look for each cue in the show. The follow-spots used to highlight the primary character in each scene also had a clear purpose and system of cues. These ideas gave me a solid framework in which to guide my cueing progression during the technical rehearsals.

CHAPTER 3

PRODUCTION

Technical Rehearsals

During the first evening of technical rehearsals, I sought to establish a solid and firm foundation on which I could build as each day came and went. I established familiarity with how the light interacts with the set, costumes, and blocking of the play, as well as building continuity with the different angles, intensities, and color of light. As a direct result of accomplishing these goals, I created a basic list of adjustments that I knew I needed to make in order to further shape the light for this play over the next week of technical rehearsals. After the first day of technical rehearsals, I changed the general gym wash system color to a warmer blue from the icy blue I had initially chosen. I refocused the entire balcony rail color wash systems to fill more of the stage than I had originally planned. I also discovered that the system of light I chose for the many banners and signs posted on the walls of the “cafetorinasium” were not necessary. These became spare units for use during other moments of the play where I would later discover I needed more light to complete the design. The only aspect of the design I had not begun to shape was the use of follow-spots, which I would later use to draw the audience attention to the primary character in each scene.

The next three days of tech would be a series of run-throughs of the play with necessary stops to refine cueing and work out the placement of cues. The second day, we focused on the first half of the play. Through the day, it became clear that a few key elements of the design were missing. The first was a discovery of the importance of the microphone where spellers would continually return to spell a word and reveal to the

audience another aspect of their character. I did not have a reliable way to draw the audience's attention to the microphone. In order to address this need, I changed the color in the microphone system of specials to a more neutral white light in order to pull the character out of the space. The second discovery was a lack of reliable systems of color washes from the front and the back to fill the space and create distinct lighting environments appropriate for each character. To address this issue, I added orange and purple color washes from the box boom positions and changed the color in my backlight from green to purple. The last discovery was the appropriate use of the follow spots. On the third day, I discovered how to address this last challenge. The solution was a matter of giving more control to my assistant, Dana DeLise, in determining the use of the follow spots based on my preliminary cue list.

My preliminary cue list suggested that the follow spots track the primary character in each scene regardless of the type of scene. By the third day, it was clear that my initial thoughts about how to use the follow spots were over-ambitious and inappropriate for the production. I explained to Dana that we would not require the follow spots during the present time environments, and that we would establish clear choices about character tracking as we slowly progressed through the production. I gave her the initial choice regarding the continuation of the design of the follow spots, which ultimately freed my mind to concentrate on shaping the arc of the play. By focusing my attention on cueing the arc of the play, I provided Dana with sufficient information to make bold and artistic choices that supported my overall design concept.

By the end of day two of the technical rehearsals, I had established a more clear and concise cueing sequence that helped to shape the arc of the play. Initially, I had pre-

cued the show to shift light not only between lighting environments, but also with character movement from stage left to stage right, up stage to down stage, and especially in sync with instrumental shifts and beats during the musical numbers. The clearest discovery I made was how to continue cueing the present time lighting environments. They did not require any lighting cues. In a similar way, the frozen moments and internal monologues did not require any internal cueing. A transition cue into the lighting environment and a transition to restore present time were sufficient to establish these lighting environments. The flashback and musical numbers, however, required both a transition cue in and out of the environment, as well as multiple internal cues within each scene. The flashbacks often required drawing attention to both the primary character having the flashback and the secondary characters engaging in the flashback. For example, the focus of the light would shift between Coneybear and his family while he explained to them how he was selected to participate in the Twenty-Fifth Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. The musical numbers had the widest range of cues. Each song had varying degrees of intensity, color saturation, movement across and throughout the stage, as well as shifts in and out of present time and musical number environments. Many musical numbers would end with a moment punctuated with lights and sound, then followed by a line from Panch, one of the bee judges. These technical and cueing discoveries put us in position to begin the third day with the second half of the production.

Half way through the third day my advisor, Matthew Richards, arrived to observe my progress and approach to working through the show. At the dinner break he suggested I find better ways to utilize the side light systems by changing the color. I had chosen

several lightly tinted gels that, when turned on, all looked relatively similar. The next day I decided to change two of those colors for a more saturate blue and pink. Matthew was most helpful by asking me to be more specific in how and why I was shaping the different lighting environments. I had successfully shaped the play by creating different lighting cues, but these cues resembled each other so closely that the audience would be unable to distinguish between a frozen scene and a memory wash or a memory wash and an internal moment.

The next day of technical rehearsals was the last day of the first week. I spent this day taking notes about how to clarify the distinction between the lighting environments. Regardless of my initial design plan, I had been using the same system of textured light, similar colors, saturation, and intensity in each of the memory scenes, frozen moments, and internal moments. Even some of the musical numbers were not distinct enough from each other to help suggest to the audience the progression forward in the play. For example, I considered the song PANDEMONIUM to be the most important song in the play, and yet it was the least developed by the end of the third day. It did not evoke a sense of pandemonium as the song's title and the blocking of the scene suggest.

During the run, I took detailed notes on the similarity in each scene, how I might find distinctions within each, and on questions that I still had regarding these moments. I also focused my attention on the timing of the cues. The fade in and out of each lighting cue is absolutely essential so as not to draw unwarranted attention to the lighting, but rather to give the audience a smooth unnoticeable transition from moment to moment.

I spent the next day, before the Thanksgiving break, making adjustments to the show without the actors or director in the room. I used the few hours I had available in

the theater to adjust specific lighting environments in the direction of my initial design ideas. The most important of these adjustments was the musical number, PANDEMONIUM, in which I chose to push the use of the up-light further by starting the scene with a single strong shadow and slowly adding more and more shadows as the song progressed. I also chose to move away from using only four different color shifts throughout the song to using four distinct color shifts, as well as a color chase (a series of rapid color changes). The combination of the myriad of shadows and the color chase in collaboration with the actors blocking solidified the random chaos in the world. The purpose of PANDEMONIUM is inherent in the title, and its importance to the story becomes clear as the production proceeds. Each character's life proves to be pandemonium of one form or another.

I spent another significant portion of my day re-adjusting how I used the template wash to break up the lighting environments. By this point in the process, I had used the template at my discretion without reservation. I believe this choice added to the confusion and lack of distinction between scenes. In order to address this issue, I turned off this system of light in most scenes except for the frozen moments. The template wash became the primary vocabulary for the frozen moments.

The last part of my day was spent taking out the color that had found its way into the internal monologues. I had inadvertently added color to these scenes, rather than merely fading the light on the secondary characters and pulling focus toward the primary character. This was a relatively difficult task to accomplish without the actors in the space; as a result, I made choices with my best judgment in hopes that we would be able to re-visit these scenes when we returned from the Thanksgiving break.

Upon returning from the Thanksgiving break, I spent the first night watching the show and taking notes on any adjustments that did not successfully accomplish my goal(s). It was after this run-through that Dawn and I discovered we needed to spend the next morning discussing the meaning behind certain moments in the show. I believe the information we were lacking was wrapped up in the transitions from scene to scene. Through the course of developing my lighting ideas for this production, Dawn and I had unknowingly strayed from Dawn's artistic direction. We did not take the time during the previous technical rehearsals to finesse the transitions from one lighting environment to the next. To address this issue, Dawn and I spent the day answering questions about the show, its arc, and how we could resolve the challenge of making these lighting environments distinct while driving the story forward through the transition of each different scene. We talked about which scenes would require a strong button like MAGIC FOOT, and which songs would require a clean fade out of the musical number into the present time like the I LOVE YOU song. We paid special attention to the different internal monologues to help shore up the choices I had made without the actors on stage. With this new information, we were able to make better choices about how to cue the scene in such a way as to focus the audience's attention to the correct character on stage.

That night's technical rehearsal was intended to be a run of the show, but in order to make the necessary adjustments to the cueing, we were granted a special evening to step through the show. During this last evening, we were able to execute the ideas we had discussed earlier in the day, which brought us to a successful understanding of the production and resulted in a more successful progression throughout the course of the play. It was now up to the audience to decide whether we had made distinct enough

choices to clearly tell the story, take the audience from present time to memories, internal moments, frozen moments, and musical numbers.

The Final Design

In the final design, the production team and I were able to find creative solutions to the challenges presented to us before and during technical rehearsals. The present time scenes established the world of the play allowing us the freedom to bring the audience back in time, inside the character's internal thoughts, through the narrative moments, and on magical journeys during the character's musical numbers.

In the memory scenes, I isolated the primary character of the memory and filled the space with color. For example, the first scene of the play starts in present time with Rona Piretti on stage. She then has a flashback to her championship bee, while the lighting shifts to a similar shade of pink as her costume with a follow spot as the source of isolation.

During the musical numbers, the characters and I took the audience on a colorful journey through the emotional twists and turns of the play. Olive's musical number, I LOVE YOU, is a lonely song about her parent's love and her understanding of love. In this scene, I pull the audience's attention through the space slowly as the characters move to an extreme down left position and isolate themselves from the rest of the world. Barfee's musical number, MAGIC FOOT, is high energy and boisterous dancing. In this scene, I build the initial blue color and pull the audience's attention to Barfee with a follow spot; then I build the scene with side-light to accentuate the dancing. I end the piece by pulling the audience's attention to the characters down center with a follow spot as they are bathed in a pool of magical pinks, purples, and blues.

The internal monologues gave insight into each character's discovery about themselves. For these scenes, I faded the light around the characters having the experience while maintaining the essence of the world of the gym. The most successful of these moments was during Barfee's discovery that he no longer needs his magic foot to write out the letters. Isolating Barfee helped to heighten the emotional excitement of the character as he looked out into the audience for his mother's encouragement and shared joy about his new discovery.

The frozen moments were filled with texture and a dull color allowing the characters to give the audience narrative information that pushed the story forward. This is most clearly represented at the end of the play as we bounce back and forth between present time and frozen moments where the actors provide the audience with the epilogue. The constant and predictable nature of the cueing and lighting environment allowed the audience to focus on what the actors were saying and doing rather than on what the stage looked like during each rapid shift.

Conclusion

This production challenged my ability to execute clearly and concisely my initial design choices through the rigorous and fast paced nature of the cueing process. However, that process, the support of my production team, in collaboration with faculty support provided me with the appropriate environment for discovering a greater clarity amongst the five distinct lighting environments. In the end, I believe I was successful at maintaining the core of my initial ideas while allowing for the technical process to strengthen and transform the play with each new discovery. The open line of communication developed between Dawn and myself was the essential ingredient for this

production to be the learning tool that it was. I am glad to have been able to explore many different challenges during the course of this production. Each color change, shift in focus of the light, cueing sequence, and the timing of the cues was a dynamic adventure that informed my research as much as my research informed my final design.

The process of designing lights for The Twenty-Fifth Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee stimulated a desire to find greater connections between story and lights. Understanding the need for an arc and how to build it using the textual arc of the play as a guide, informed my research, design, and cueing choices throughout the entire process. This production and paper are the culmination of many experimental years of telling stories with light.

I believe the final design was successful, in as much as the audience enjoyed the story. There was never a night when I was in attendance that I did not sense a strong love for the characters and an understanding of the progression of the play. My work as a lighting designer and theatrical artist was consistent with the story telling, thorough in my desire to give the audience something to believe in and enjoy, and successful at producing a production that would incite the audience to interact with and change the world around them.

APPENDIX A

PHOTO CD

Contents:

Format:

PHOTOS

01. Cafetorinasium.....	JPEG
02. Rona Moment.....	JPEG
03. Pandemonium.....	JPEG
04. Pandemonium.....	JPEG
05. Magic Foot.....	JPEG
06. Woe Is Me.....	JPEG
07. Magic Foot Reprise.....	JPEG
08. Marcy & Jesus.....	JPEG
09. Putnam County Contestants.....	JPEG

APPENDIX B
DOCUMENT CD

Contents:

Format:

DRAFTING

Light Plot.....	PDF
Center Line Section.....	PDF
Boom Plate.....	PDF

PAPERWORK

Magic Sheet.....	PDF
Scene Breakdown.....	PDF
Conventional Cue List.....	PDF
Follow Spot Cue List.....	PDF
Channel Hookup.....	PDF
Shop Order.....	PDF